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Camas movie theater gets rave reviews

By WEB RUBLE
of The Oregonian staff

CAMAS — The first week of operation at Camas' new, refurbished Liberty Theater has outstripped expectations, one of the theater's two owners said Thursday.

Mark A. Mescall was referring both to attendance and comments he has heard from the community and cinema fans.

The theater, 313 Fourth Ave., opened June 29 in what Mescall called "a tuxedo event." Some 320 persons — some dressed in tuxedos and others in 1920s- and 1930s-era clothing — sipped champagne and nibbled hors d'oeuvres before viewing the original 1933 version of "King Kong."

Mescall anticipated that owner and staff efforts would be rewarded with a good opening-night champagne party, but attendance and enthusiasm exceeded their hopes.

"It was super," Mescall said.

Warren L. Dunn, who teaches art and related subjects at Clark College, and Mescall teamed up as partners to lease the building last February. They immediately plunged into redoing it in 1920s-1930s style — something that has brought praise from nostalgia buffs. A few years ago, Mescall, 29, was one of Dunn's students and the college's production commissioner.

The two found that "just about everything" had to be done before the theater could open. It needed a new roof, ceiling, lighting, bathrooms, projector and snack-bar equipment.

To get the job done by the appointed late-June opening, Dunn, Mescall, assistant manager Traci R. Ness and some other employees worked 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week.

"It was strictly a deadline proposition," Mescall said. "The 580 bulbs under the marquee — a 1933-vintage heraldic motif measuring 47½-by-5½ feet — worked when we turned on the power, and the painter was just washing out some of his brushes when the first guests began arriving."

There has been no falloff since that opening-night crowd.

Mescall said the theater, which has seating for 400, has been full or close to capacity for most showings. The Liberty Theater has been showing four performances daily and will continue to operate on that schedule seven days a week.

Matinees are at 2 and 4:30 p.m. Evening showings are at 7 and 9:30. Tickets are 99 cents for the matinees. Monday and Tuesday nights are family nights when tickets are also 99 cents a person.

Dunn and Mescall plan live entertainment the first Sunday of every month, beginning in August. A fall engagement of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra has been booked. The partners will book a mixture of classic and contemporary movies.

Liberty Theater employs 18, including its owners, to operate the ticket booth, snack bar and projector and for ushering. Some 200 people applied for the jobs.

Mescall is the main projectionist. The theater's new Sper Lune-X projector armed with a 2,000-watt xenon bulb "is so neat I think I'll ask it to marry me," he said.

Upstairs opposite the theater's projection booth is an old projector that has a 1935 projector head, 1948 sound equipment and 1954 lamp housing. Its reel assembly dates to 1928. It's one of the main attractions in a minimuseum of early day movie equipment and paraphernalia that Dunn and Mescall are developing.

One of the come-ons for customers and financial aids has been the selling of stars. Purchasers get their names inscribed on the stars, which will be hung on foyer walls.

"It's our answer to Grauman's Chinese Theater," Dunn said.

Rose-colored stars sell for $20 each, gold ones for $50. A special $75 star guarantees its buyer a special seat in the theater balcony any time he or she wants it — with a half-hour's notice.

Some 300 stars have been sold so far, bringing in nearly $5,000.

The theater has had at least one commercial spinoff. An ice cream parlor opened next door two weeks ago. Portlanders McClellan S. and W. Lucille Shay bought out Freeman's Sandwich Shop at 311 Fourth Ave. Dunn noted that Camas' original movie house — then called the Grenada — had an ice cream parlor next door.

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STARS — Warren L. Dunn, one of Liberty Theater's two owners, shows some of the stars he is selling to boost theater income. Stars, with buyers' names inscribed, are hung in theater foyer.